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SUBJECT: BULGARIAN POLICE PROTEST, DEMAND REFORMS

1. (SBU) Summary: For the third time in a little over a month, Bulgarian police officers protested on January 17 over low wages and poor work conditions. Despite conflicts between police and student protesters earlier in the week, students on January 17 supported the police protest and joined calls for the resignation of Interior Minister Mikov. After constructive negotiations with the Interior Ministry leadership, representatives of police throughout the country gave the Interior Minister a month to show demonstrable action towards addressing their concerns. The protests highlight morale issues that could propel - or undermine -- the ministry's reform efforts. End Summary.

2. (SBU) Uncertainty within the Interior Ministry as it undergoes reform and pay disparity with the State Agency for National Security Agency (DANS) employees, who receive almost 2-3 times the pay of MOI employees, has had a devastating impact on police morale. Legally restricted from striking, police officers silently gathered on January 17 to place their hands in their pockets as a symbolic sign of protest, after prior symbolic protests on December 13 and on December 20. Six police representatives (three from Sofia and one each from three provincial towns) negotiated with the MOI leadership on behalf of police nationwide. Police protest representatives gave the MOI leadership their demands including: a 50 percent raise starting from January 1, unlimited overtime pay, a 200 percent increase for food and clothing allowances, as well as changes in the MOI law to allow more employees to join unions and to punish criminals who attack police officers.

3. (SBU) Both sides expressed the desire to continue dialog. Minister Mikov commented that non-monetary demands could be addressed, while those regarding pay increases and overtime would be virtually impossible. In the coming weeks, the police protestors will look for the Interior Minister to present their demands for increased pay to the Council of Ministers and the Parliament. Police protest representative Georgi Iliev told the media that the police were pushing for resolution of the salary issue by March 1 and sought action on larger issues facing the ministry within four months. The timeline for the establishment of a new union to represent MOI employees, a major rank-and-file priority, remains unclear. For now, MOI employees are represented by three unions, for police, firemen, and civilian employees. On January 20, the MOI proposed a 5 percent salary increase, effective January 1, but the police remain unsatisfied.

4. (SBU) Since the passage of modest MOI reform legislation and initial MOI reorganization in July 2008, discontent in the ministry has grown as the reform effort has stalled. Sparked by rumors that police officers would not receive Christmas bonuses, the first protests began on December 13 in Sofia and at least ten cities nationwide. Prime Minister Stanishev and Interior Minister Mikov charged opposition political party GERB and its unofficial leader, Sofia mayor Boiko Borisov, of politicizing the issues facing the ministry. Borisov, who was MOI Chief Secretary from 2001-2005, rejected these allegations and said the police deserved to be paid the same as DANS employees. On December 18, the MOI announced that the police would receive bonuses of 350-400 leva, at a total expense of 20 million leva. Even after the announcement, discontent and

growing dissatisfaction with MOI leadership continued to brew on police blogs.

15. (SBU) Comment: With a reported 63,000 employees (and 53,000 officially on the books, of which around 40,000 are uniform police, operatives and investigators), MOI has one police officer for every 300 citizens. This manpower is not effectively allocated given the scale of the Bulgarians' crime and corruption problems. With police ranking barely ahead of prosecutors and judges in public confidence in integrity, trust in the MOI is low. But, with national elections on the horizon, there is no political appetite to trim the MOI's bloated, ineffective workforce.

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